

Student revolt shakes a nation

By Anne-christine d'Adesky

MEXICO CITY

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT THAT HAS SHAKEN Mexico for the last six months has scored an important victory. On February 17 students and administrators at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) reached an agreement on how to settle a heated conflict over university reform. The agreement ends a 20-day strike by 320,000 students that had virtually closed down the university.

The two sides agreed to settle their differences through a university-wide congress that will include students, administrators and staff members. The students had been demanding a pluralistic congress to address university reform as an alternative to reforms enacted in September by the administration. Those reforms are now suspended but not repealed.

The students were jubilant at the strike's end, but they vow that the movement sparked by the walkout is far from over. "This is the first social movement of its kind in the country that has been victorious," said Cuauhtemoc Medina, a student leader. "The next step is even more complicated. We have to defend our rights within the congress and

make sure that the [administration's] reforms which are now suspended be repealed."

The student movement started here is being transformed into a national student movement involving other sectors of the university—professors, academic workers, parents—and has captured the attention of most Mexicans with extensive media coverage of its actions. That is because the issues

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underlying the UNAM conflict are not merely academic, but economic and political ones. "What has been happening at UNAM is a microcosm of what has been taking place in the society at large," said Carlos Monsivais, a noted journalist and writer.

The university's problems—overcrowding, lack of resources, authoritarianism, a bulging bureaucracy—are felt throughout Mexican society. Thousands of people—the *damnificados*—were made homeless in last year's devastating earthquake. The present economic crisis has driven down the standard of living of most Mexicans. Overall, the prevailing mood in the country has been one of bitterness and frustration, with a strong desire for change.

Now, with the UNAM strike, a social movement has sprouted. The protesters were backed by hundreds of thousands of students, professors and academic workers who desire what Monsivais calls "greater participation in what must be a fundamental transformation of the university."

Since September 12, when the student movement began, Mexico has experienced an awakening unlike anything it has experienced since the heady days of 1968. That UNAM student movement ended in disaster when riot police massacred 700 students. The slaughter shocked Mexico and sent the country into a period of silent passivity.

A sleeping giant: At UNAM, all was quiet for 18 years. Dissident students and teachers were quickly expelled; the government worked hand-in-hand with the administration to cap any signs of unrest. Yet nothing could have prepared them for the current movement, which has caught everyone by surprise—including the students—with a brilliant campaign of negotiations, huge assemblies and marches and a decentralized strike that is notable for its commitment to democratic process and nonviolence.

Monsivais summed up the current movement: "UNAM has woken up everybody and no one is ready to go back to sleep. Since 1968, we have been asleep. There was the earthquake, then the foreign debt. Now, there is the students. They have shown everyone how to fight back, how to defend their rights with debate and intelligence. These are lessons all Mexicans must learn."

On April 16, 1986, Rector Jorge Carpizo—the head of UNAM—outlined a comprehensive program of academic reforms. His 26-

overcome these problems," Carpizo told the University Council (CU), UNAM's highest legislative body. "Right now we are compromising the students. If we don't act with great force, this could be a 'university of the masses' without quality."

After culling the university community's response to the plan, the CU approved the reforms in September, despite visible opposition by students who had just returned from summer vacation and were stunned by the proposal. The student response to the reforms was immediate and harsh: an angry denunciation of Carpizo and the CU as right-wing elitists by hundreds of students. The pupils quickly elected a University Student Council (CEU) and mapped out a defense.

Student power: CEU leaders acknowledge that university standards had declined but demand a voice in the reform process. "For us the real university reform will arise from the bases (students, teachers, workers) and not from a handful of administrators," said Guadalupe Carrasco, a CEU leader. "We don't recognize the University Council. They should repeal the measures." The student council says that the CU does not represent all sectors of the university and is biased toward the Rectory. Many CU members—including Carpizo—have been hand-picked by the government, a political link the CEU claims is at the base of the reform idea. They think the administration has accepted an austerity plan like the one the government has assumed to overcome the problem of foreign debt. To the students, the relationship of the economic crisis to UNAM's steadily shrinking budget is clear.

The CEU, which now represents more than 90 percent of UNAM students, says that Carpizo is "trying to make UNAM into a more elitist and conservative institution," said Carrasco. She argues that the rector's proposal is a not-so-subtle step to weed out poor and working students.

The more the two sides have argued, the more holes have appeared in the Carpizo plan, and another, more political agenda has surfaced for the Rectory.

For example, the new departmental rules will require teachers to follow a strict curriculum. "Basically, it's the administration's attempt to control what will be taught," said CEU leader Medina. Teachers and academic workers have recently joined the CEU to demand salary increases and more participation in university matters.

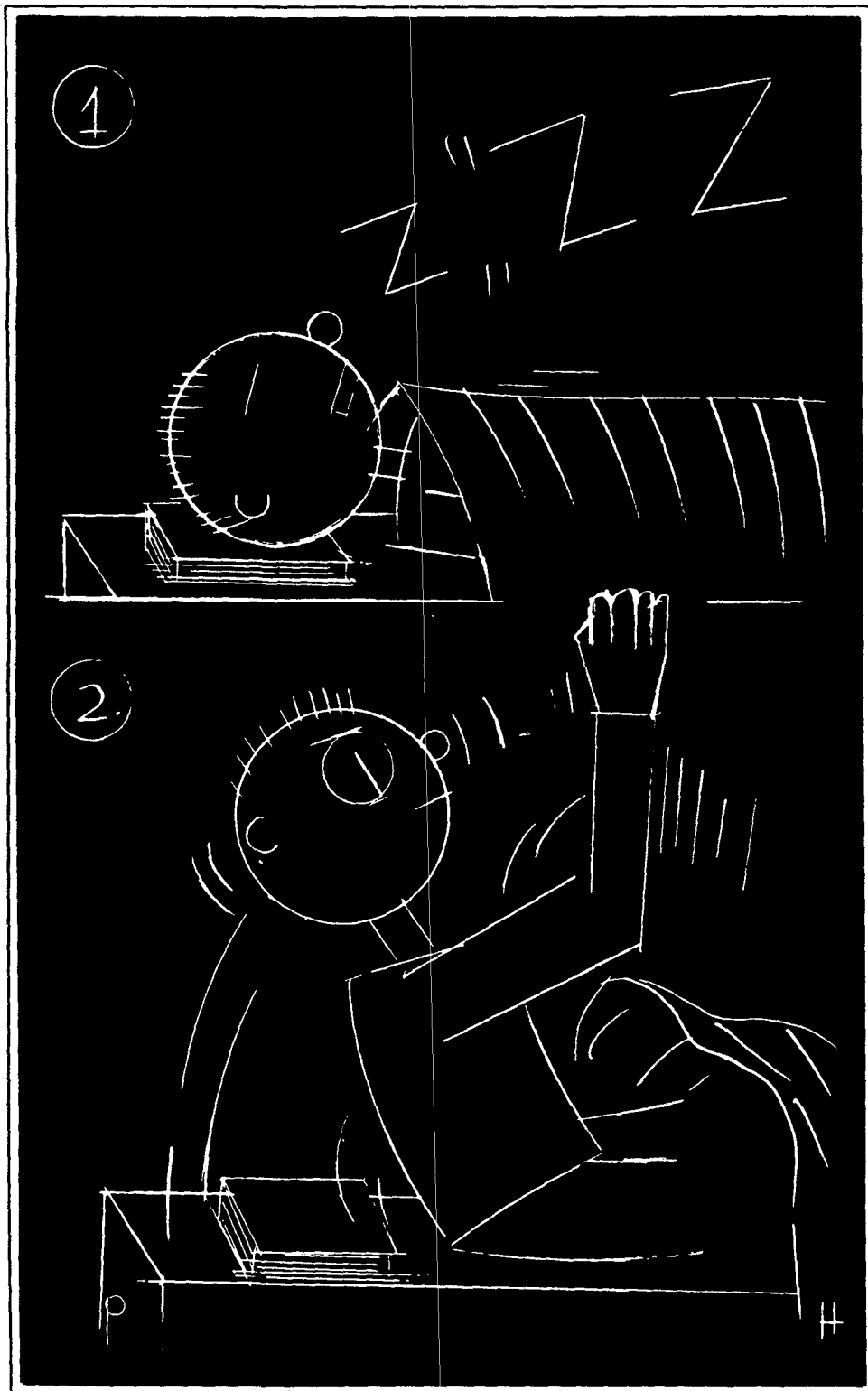
They have been supported by their counterparts in universities across Mexico. At UNAM teachers' salaries have fallen by 40 percent in real terms over the last five years, while administration salaries have doubled over the same period. The situation is even worse at universities in the provinces, where the government subsidy is only a fraction of UNAM's.

Carpizo recently adopted a 290,000-pesos budget for UNAM that he says is a 121 percent increase over 1986. But the CEU has argued that the current inflation rate of more than 100 percent chops that figure down to only a 2.8 percent increase in real terms.

The budget will be a central subject of debate in the upcoming university congress. No matter what the outcome of that congress is, gains of the student movement are already clear: the students have set an example of democratic activism that few in Mexico are likely to forget.

As Medina puts it: "I think we have given a new future to the university and to the next generation of Mexican students." □

Anne-christine d'Adesky is a Mexico City-based journalist.



The student strike ended February 17, but it will have lasting impact. One Mexican journalist says the students "have shown everyone how to fight back, how to defend their rights with debate and intelligence. These are lessons all Mexicans must learn."

point proposal addressed the most glaring problems: overcrowded classes, low standards for teaching and research, part-time attendance by students and faculty and the university's responsibility to provide quality education for all students. Carpizo based his diagnosis of the university on these staggering statistics: from 1976-85, undergraduate grades averaged 3.85 on a scale of 10. If UNAM had changed its open-admissions policy and accepted only students with grades of six or better, for instance, they would have accepted only 7.6 percent of all enrolled students.

To remedy that, Carpizo wanted to get rid of open admissions, to standardize departmental exams and to change fees for registration and university services. His proposal essentially stiffened requirements at UNAM. "We must take a position to ensure that the necessary measures are taken to

By Kevin Robinson

GUATEMALA CITY

REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE EUROPEAN Economic Community (EEC), Contadora and the Central American countries signed a surprisingly strong declaration in support of Contadora at the third EEC Central American conference here on February 9-10. Although only minor advances were added to previous economic agreements, the final ratification of existing accord by all of the Central American countries now paves the way for closer economic relations between the two regions.

Sharp political disputes and tensions overshadowed the conference's positive results, however, and a February 15 summit of Central American presidents in Costa Rica—which excluded Nicaragua—threatens to undermine the Contadora peace process. At the summit, condemned by Nicaragua as intervention in its internal affairs, the participating presidents discussed a new Costa Rican "peace plan" to "democratize" Nicaragua.

The EEC and Central America first met in Costa Rica in 1984, laying the basis for an economic accord drawn up at a second meeting in Luxembourg in 1985. Costa Rica and Panama's ratification of that accord two weeks ago, the first of its kind between Europe and Central America, is hailed as the principal achievement at the Guatemala conference.

While offering favorable trade relations with Europe, the accord promises to "substantially increase" financial assistance for regional projects that could raise industrial and agricultural production and increase trade through the Central American Common Market. Until now, bilateral aid agreements between EEC and Central American countries nearly eclipsed multilateral accords. Total bilateral EEC assistance, principally to Nicaragua and Honduras, was five times greater than multilateral aid from 1979-85, according to EEC figures.

"Initially everybody wanted financing for their own projects, but we realized that the EEC doesn't want the totals on a country-by-country basis, but rather regional development projects for Central American economic integration," Guatemalan Deputy Minister of Economy Eduardo Estrada said. "The European community believes the road to peace lies in mutual economic development and cooperation."

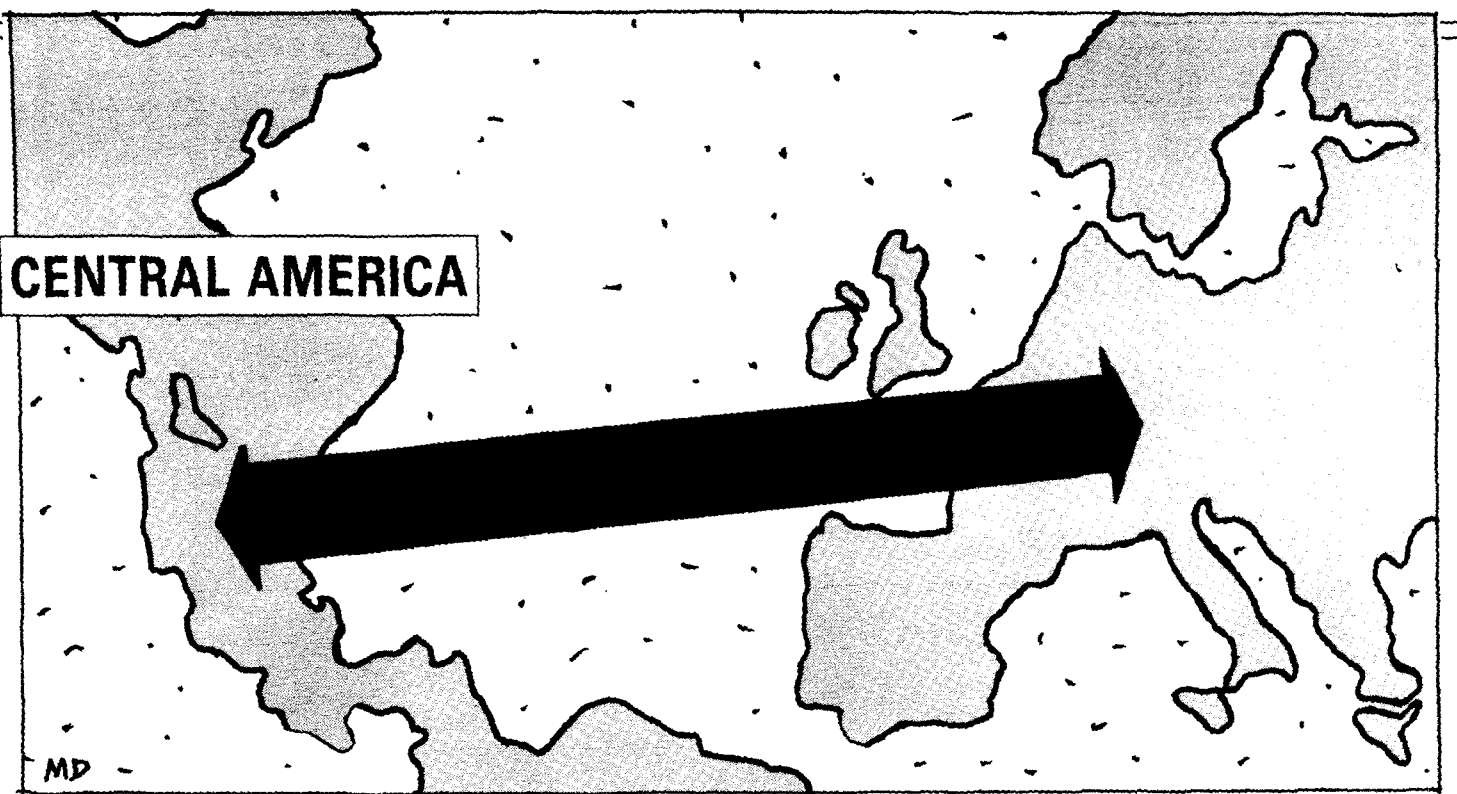
Despite the accord's economic benefits, however, Estrada doubts that annual EEC aid will surpass \$80 million. "If we distribute that among six Central American countries, it's a minimal amount," he somberly recognized.

"The economic accord doesn't strike joy in the heart of anybody, since we didn't come with much to offer," commented one high-level European diplomat who requested anonymity. "Let's be realistic, the European community is involved in many areas of the world and Central America is not one of its top priorities."

The EEC's main intent is to keep the Contadora peace negotiations alive, according to the source. The conference's strongly worded "political declaration is more important than trade and aid."

Against force: Among other things, the declaration upholds the principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and self-determination. It rejects the use of force to resolve regional problems, backing Contadora as Latin America's "chosen means for finding solutions to the regional crisis."

Special support is offered for the creation



Europe buttresses Contadora peace plan

of a Central American parliament suggesting possible EEC aid for its formation, and calling for close future cooperation with the European parliament once it is formed. The Central American parliament, originally proposed by Guatemala, is envisioned as a regional forum where the Central Americans could discuss their grievances free from foreign intervention.

Contadora has stagnated since June, when negotiations broke down over the Central Americans' signing of a final peace accord. An unprecedented tour of the Central American republics in January by U.N. and Organization of American States (OAS) representatives, along with the eight Latin American countries in Contadora and its support group, spurred international hopes for a revival of peace talks. But the sharp political debates and tensions evident at the EEC conference underscored the U.N. and OAS representatives' affirmation that the Central American nations still lack the "political will" to negotiate a Contadora peace accord.

Six days of grueling debate among the conference's preparatory commissions over the political communique led many conference participants to predict precipitately that a political declaration would not be forthcoming. In addition, opposition by the "Tegucigalpa bloc"—Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica, the U.S.' closest regional allies who have consistently accused Contadora of partiality toward the Sandinistas—prohibited the four Contadora support group countries from participating in the conference and was viewed by many diplomats present as an effort to diminish Contadora's influence.

Behind closed doors: Moreover, on February 15 the four presidents from the Tegucigalpa bloc countries and Guatemala met behind closed doors to discuss a new Costa Rican "peace proposal" that sidesteps Contadora, calling for Sandinista negotiations with the counterrevolutionaries, followed by "free" elections in Nicaragua, in exchange for a cutoff of U.S. aid to the contras.

Although the participating presidents declined to endorse the plan—openly backed by the U.S.—as a joint petition to the Sandinistas, they called for a new meeting in Guatemala in May to include Nicaragua, where the plan would be discussed by all five Central American presidents.

Nicaragua, which firmly rejects any foreign intervention in its internal affairs, charged that

Costa Rica organized the summit under the U.S.' auspices (see accompanying story). "The meeting is the latest display of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua," read a sharp Sandinista communique, "and it's a clear act of sabotage against the Contadora peace process."

"It is not just the superpowers who have influence internationally," says a Danish diplomat.

Clearly, however, the EEC's firm backing of Contadora will help offset any peace initiatives that marginalize Contadora. "It is important that the Central American countries understand it is not just the superpowers who have influence internationally, and that the European community is taking an interest in the regional conflict," said a high-level Danish diplomat recently at the EEC conference.

The Reagan administration, which ac-

cuses Contadora of favoring the Sandinistas, appears uncomfortable with the EEC's involvement. At the first EEC Central American conference in 1984, Secretary of State George Shultz asked the EEC to exclude Nicaragua from any economic accord. The week prior to the latest Guatemalan conference, U.S. special envoy to Central America Phillip Habib met with government officials from most EEC countries.

"The letter sent by the U.S. to the European ministers in San Jose in 1984 was written in undiplomatic and inadmissible terms, although probably habitual North American language in its relations with Latin America," said Claude Cheysson, the EEC leader in charge of European Latin American relations. "This time, with Philip Habib's visit to Europe, the U.S. communicated its point of view in a more intelligent manner."

Said another European diplomat present at the conference, "Our open support for Contadora serves as an embarrassment to the U.S. They find us a bit irritating." □

Kevin Robinson is *In These Times'* correspondent in Guatemala.

Newspapers are the latest weapon in war of words

The war of words between Nicaragua and its neighbors to the north and south has heated up in recent days—this time in printed form—as a result of Nicaragua's angry reaction to the February 15 meeting of four Central American presidents in San Jose, Costa Rica, to which Daniel Ortega was not invited (see accompanying story).

In anticipation of the meeting, the Nicaraguan Embassy in San Jose took out a full-page political advertisement in the February 6 edition of *La Nacion*, Costa Rica's leading newspaper. The ad strongly criticized the governments of Costa Rica, Honduras and El Salvador for "docility manifested under pressure from the United States; docility that makes them accomplices in the interventionist policies."

The plan discussed at the meeting called for "real" elections in Nicaragua and negotiations with the non-armed opposition. The ad replied: "We do not accept that any country, much less neo-col-

onies, should pretend to give us lessons in democracy...."

La Nacion ran the ad on page 11 of its Friday edition. It ran a disclaimer as well, on page two. The disclaimer stated that the editorial board had decided to run the ad because "we believe in free expression of ideas, a right, we should note, that is scoffed at in Nicaragua."

The next day, however, in *El Nuevo Diario*, Nicaragua's largest daily, an ad from the Honduran Embassy in Managua sharply criticized Nicaragua for its "lack of democracy and political openness." The ad ran in a prominent place on the edition's third page, seemingly refuting the Costa Rican daily's claim about an absence of free expression.

The Honduran ad called for negotiations between the Sandinista government and the contras, and new elections—two moves the Sandinistas have constantly refused to accept.

—Alan Gottlieb